Scotland and the North

SCOTLAND AND THE NORTH

Penny Fielding

To think about Romanticism in national terms -- the possibility that there might be a 'Scottish Romanticism' distinct from an English, British, German, European, or any other national form -- asks us first to set down some ideas about space and time upon which such a concept might be predicated. First of all, dating 'Romanticism' as a period requires some expansion when the whole of Britain is included. Interest in Romance as a non-realist narrative genre or a literary form of feeling looks outward from English metropolitan and cultural centres towards Celtic regions in the poetry of Thomas Gray and William Collins in the 1750s, and spreads from Scotland throughout Europe with the emergence in the 1760s of James Macpherson's *Ossian* poems. In another way of thinking about periodicity, Scottish Romanticism did not demand a radical severance with past cultural traditions, but spun them into a complex web of contrasts, continuations, and ironic reflections. What we might think of as a 'predecessor', the Scottish Enlightenment, retains a presence in Scottish Romanticism. The 'science of man' developed by David Hume and others was an approach to commercial society as distinctively modern, marking a break from superstition, civic violence, and faction. In a modern civil society, citizens would form relations with each other as feeling, sympathetic individuals.

In a seeming paradox typical of the way Scottish culture was constructing itself, the best example of this modern civic society is the supposedly 'primitive' poet Robert Burns. Burns presents an opportunity to think about the varieties of Romanticism in a British context that takes account of developments in Scottish literature and thought. On

the one hand, he was a significant influence on English Romantic poets; here was a poet who, beyond any doubt, wrote in 'language really used by men', and who could represent '[l]ow and rustic life', two of the criteria for poetry in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.[1] The idea that proximity to nature gave the poet greater access to his or her own feelings and a clearer expression of them fitted Burns well, and Wordsworth's experience of reading him was that 'every where you have the presence of human life'.[2] Wordsworth visited Burns's grave on his tour of Scotland with his sister Dorothy in 1803 and imagined his connection with the earlier poet:

> True friends though diversely inclined;
> But heart with heart and mind with mind,
> Where the main fibres are entwined,
> Through Nature's skill,
> May even by contraries be joined
> More closely still.[3]

[1] 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), in William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), i. 869. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

[2] Letter to Coleridge, 27 Feb. 1799, in *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald A. Low (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 131.

[3] Wordsworth, 'At the Grave of Burns', lines 43-8.

This stanza is not only written in Burns' characteristic metre (though perhaps without his characteristic energy), it is also a reminder that Burns was a poet of the eighteenth century. When Keats visited the same grave fifteen years later, he was reminded of the solitariness and pain of human life ('All is cold Beauty; pain is never done'[4]) but Burns clearly thought of himself as a social figure interested in that Enlightenment combination of physiology and psychology where the 'fibres' of heart and mind are joined, and in that Scottish emphasis on a society bound together by feeling and imaginative engagement. Among Burns's finest poetry are his epistles, which temper the Romantic characterisation of him as a poet of direct natural feeling. Burns, a poet as ambitious as any other of his day for social acclaim and patronage, brilliantly exploits the classic form of eighteenth-century sociability, the verse epistle. His epistle to John Lapraik describes a social gathering at which Burns hears a song he has not heard before, which, like Wordsworth's fibres of friendship, impresses him with a bodily sensation through the heart strings:

> There was ae *sang*, amang the rest,
> Aboon them a' it pleas'd me best,
> That some kind husband had addrest,
> To some sweet wife:
> It thirl'd the heart-strings thro' the breast,
> A' to the life.

[4] 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns', line 8, in John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003).

I've scarce heard ought describ'd sae weel,
What gen'rous, manly bosoms feel;
Thought I, 'Can this be *Pope*, or *Steele*,
Or *Beattie's* wark;'
They tald me 'twas an odd kind chiel
About *Muirkirk*.[5]

In the Epistle to Lapraik, the song -- natural, spontaneous, immediate -- is not presented directly but described in the social form of a letter, and the poem plays ironically with ideas about writing and value. The song Burns hears could, he imagines, be by the neoclassical satirist Alexander Pope, the urbane journalist Richard Steele, or the Professor of Moral Philosophy James Beattie. With the revelation that it is by 'an odd kind chiel' in a neighbouring village in rural Ayrshire, Burns poises himself between bathos (as if he cannot tell the difference) and a tribute to his friend who is just as skilled as these eminent writers. Later he claims to be not a real poet, but 'a *Rhymer* like by chance' (line 50) while simultaneously building into the poem his knowledge of the classics. The poem is at once witty, urbane, and detached, and celebratory of feeling, emotion, and sensibility. One of Burns's most famous poems, 'To a Mouse', also pulls in two directions: Burns is *both* the solitary figure in the landscape, beset by sentiments

[5] 'Epistle to J. L[aprai]k, an old Scotch Bard', lines 13-24, in Robert Burns, *Selected Poems and Songs,* ed. Robert P. Irvine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

of inexpressible doubt and anxiety, *and* the educated classicist, speculating on the nature of the bonds that hold human society together in a reference to Pope's *Essay on Man*.[6]

To think about Scotland and Romanticism in temporal terms immediately conjures up spatial ones and ways in which history and geography sustain a complex relation of causes and effects that seek to demonstrate forms of cultural progress and historical difference, while simultaneously questioning the nature of progress itself. In a simple sense, the map of Scotland calls attention to possible national difference, both from England and internally within Scotland. The visual map of Britain becomes fluid and variable when cultural-regional geographies are laid over it. Is 'Britain' an island? Two islands? An archipelago? Scotland on the one hand seems to invite a clear bipartite division of Britain into nations formerly independent of each other. But on the other, it acts as a reminder that Britain is also a fragmentary nation of multiple islands. This is how Scotland seemed to Samuel Johnson in 1776 on his journey with James Boswell to the Western Islands of Scotland. Johnson organizes his journal sequentially with headings corresponding to the islands he visits, but there are always more in view and too many to see them all. They are 'scattered in the sea' and the sea is 'broken by the multitude of islands'.[7] The far north of Scotland also seemed to visitors to dissolve into

---

[6] For a more extensive survey of Burns in relation to English poets, see Nigel Leask, 'Robert Burns', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, ed. Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 134-8.

[7] Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. Mary Lascelles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 69.

a fractured (and fractal) geography that appeared to Walter Scott on his 1814 coastal tour to be 'indented by capes and studded with isles'.[8]

Alongside the indeterminacy of its exterior borders, however, Scotland seemed to offer a very clear internal division into Highlands and Lowlands, not only because of its physical geography but also because of the way this conformed to certain ideas of geographic determinism. Scottish writers (though not uniformly) pursued versions of the French political theorist Montesquieu's concepts of climate that traced forms of character and types of government to the temperature and fertility of locations. Montesquieu's argument that the people of northern climates and infertile soils are tougher and less susceptible to conquest by other nations could be summoned in support of cultural and political causes. In part this gave a national character to a nation that was no longer a state, especially after the traumatic military consequences of the Jacobite rising of 1745-6. From the 1760s, a therapeutic image of Scotland recurs -- warlike but democratic; poor but hardy; simple but moral. James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771-4) makes an explicit contrast between a richer but corrupt South (here Chile, but with a glance towards luxury and political corruption nearer home) and northern, impoverished, hardy, freedom-loving Scotland:

> With gold and gems if Chilian mountains glow,
>
> If bleak and barren Scotia's hills arise;

[8] Walter Scott, 'Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla, and the Lord knows where', in J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 7 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1837), iii. 158.

There plague and poison, lust and rapine grow;
Here peaceful are the vales, and pure the skies,
And freedom fires the soul, and sparkles in the eyes.[9]

The interaction of geography and society was itself closely interwoven in the Scottish Enlightenment's adoption of stadial models of history that plotted the history of human life from 'savagery' to modern, commercial societies. Scotland seemed to offer examples of different stages existing at the same time -- an agricultural Lowlands with developed urban centres speaking English and Scots, and a wild Highlands, Gaelic-speaking and with an economy based on hunting and herding. Scotland was at once a modern society, developing civic projects in Edinburgh's architecturally-sophisticated New Town and cultivating the arts and philosophy, and a society of ancient tribes preserving the primitive original impulses of art, song, and poetry.

One consequence of this perceived division was that Scotland seemed a place to be discovered -- a site of ethnographic difference and anthropological interest rather than the location for recognizable social behaviours, or 'manners' that are likely to be shared by the reader. Scotland (like Ireland) was subject to a distancing effect that offered a chance to study characters not only as individual people, but also as populations. Novels that take place in Scotland, most famously Scott's *Waverley* (1814) and *Rob Roy* (1817), are often framed by the protagonist's travelling there on a voyage of discovery. The first readers of *Waverley* would have recognized in it the peripatetic

[9] James Beattie, *The Minstrel; or The Progress of Genius. Book the First* (London: E and C Dilly, 1771), 5.

narrative of the Irish national tale, a well-established genre in which a protagonist from the metropolitan centre travels to the Celtic regions to negotiate social, and usually emotional, relations (see James Kelly's chapter in this volume). Susan Ferrier, the most brilliant Scottish practitioner of the novel of manners, also uses this comparative method, which colours her characters nationally as well as socially or morally. *Marriage* (1818) tells the story of a spoiled English young woman transplanted (by her marriage to a Scottish aristocrat) to Scotland to be shocked by the 'primitive' scenes she finds there. Her daughter, Mary, later visits London to be tempted by its luxury and aesthetic sophistication which she duly rejects.

The ethnography that drives interest in the Scottish-set novel was sustained both by a new focus on the 'science' of populations and the growing influence of Malthus, and by the fact that the demographic and agricultural bases of Scotland were undergoing a process of visible change. Following punitive changes in the laws of inheritance and landownership after the Jacobite rising of 1745-6, Highland society in particular saw a shift of some people onto concentrations of newly 'improved' land, and the extensive depopulation of formerly populous areas. Many Scots emigrated, either from economic choice or in the forced evictions of the Clearances in the Highlands, and Scottish national identity began to form diasporic versions of itself not obviously bounded by the geographic determinants of Highlands and Lowlands. Scotland's history, then, was at once exemplary -- illustrating the geographical reasons for social variance and the inevitable process of historical change -- and also disjunctive: the same nation with closely contiguous peoples contained vastly different social orders. Instead of one stage calmly developing into another, different stages existed at the same time, while changes were wrought not by temporal evolution but by swift and, to many observers, shocking

legal, economic, and political change. All of which leaves Scotland occupying a complex position in relation to its own temporality. On the one hand, it is a rapidly changing place with unstable social formations and links to North America, the subject of modern academic inquiry in the social sciences. On the other, Scotland becomes an ancient or even timeless place -- a window onto the original passions and experience of the human race. The negotiation of a course between these two positions persists throughout Scottish Romanticism, constructing it as a form of troubled modernity and raising the question of how a past that, according to Enlightenment historicism, should have been superseded by the present, can still live in and inform that present.

We can pick up this story in 1760. Both Highland and Lowland Scotland -- though for different reasons -- were rapidly adjusting to modern Britain. The traumatic rift of the Jacobite defeat and the subsequent suppression of Highland society, alongside the opportunities afforded to Scots in the (Scottish) Lord Bute's government, are a clear example of the temporal disjunction against which James Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760) emerges. Macpherson's 'translations' of Gaelic poetry (actually adaptations of Scottish and Irish myths and linguistic idioms) were dismissed as forgeries by some, but their popularity opened up interest in writing about the Highlands as well as in Gaelic writing, of which there was a flourishing tradition.[10] Macpherson voices a Highland landscape bearing the scars of recent wars -- depopulated, or

[10] For the complex relations of English and Gaelic in the period, see Janet Sorensen, *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

populated only by the ghosts of its former inhabitants. These shadowy figures, reduced to fleshless voices, mourn the passing of their society:

> I sit by the mossy fountain; on the top of the hill of winds. One tree is rustling above me. Dark waves roll over the heath. The lake is troubled below. The deer descend from the hill. No hunter at a distance is seen; no whistling cow-herd is nigh. It is mid-day: but all is silent. Sad are my thoughts alone.[11]

The bard Ossian is the last of his race, an audible link to an ancient Celtic past, albeit one on the verge of extinction, and a fleeting glimpse of a vanished culture. But the historicism of Scottish Romanticism is a complex affair, a doubled or uncanny state in which history is haunted by myth, while myth is also produced as historical evidence of the past. Hugh Blair, Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh and one of the earliest champions of Macpherson, saw the poems less as historical records than as aesthetic texts. Ancient poems, he wrote,

> present to us, what is more valuable than the history of such transactions as a rude age can afford, the history of human imagination and passion. They make us acquainted with the notions and feelings of our fellow-creatures in the most artless ages; discovering what objects they admired, and what pleasures they

[11] 'Fragment I', in James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 9.

> pursued, before those refinements of society had taken place, which enlarge indeed, and diversify the transactions, but disguise the manners of mankind.[12]

Macpherson's imagined Ossianic past is both distant (a 'rude age') yet also modern -- its people pursue pleasure as if they were members of a commercial society whose 'transactions' produce the leisure time to do so. This is both an 'artless' age and one that has a developed sense of aesthetic choice in the objects it admires. At the same moment that Scotland recognizes the loss of its 'primitive' past, it restores that past to new forms of cultural life. Paradoxically, it is the evidence of the primitive past that shows modern subjects how to experience their own lives in more sophisticated and complex societies. Thus, far from the stadial model in which one age succeeds another, Blair sees modernity preserving and perfecting the ancient past.

The example of Macpherson shows how assumptions about Enlightenment historicism are modified and challenged in Scottish Romanticism. Instead of stadial history's sequence of stages, we see a spectrum of continuities, modifications, echoes, and reinventions. In the attempt comprehensively to describe the fullness, richness, and variety of modern life, reference is inevitably made to the primitive conditions it has left behind. This is not, of course, exclusively Scottish. The idea of 'primitive' or original societies in which, in the words here of Scott, 'the rude minstrel has melted in natural

---

[12] Hugh Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian' (1763), in *Poems of Ossian*, ed. Gaskill, 345.

pathos',[13] was to underpin many Romantic claims to the authenticity of natural utterance, or, in the case of Herder in Germany, the original voice of a people or *Volk*. But for Scotland the question was particularly acute and complicated. In an abstract sense, the questioning of how the past lives within modernity characterizes Scottish literature in the Romantic period with a very complex and non-linear sense of temporality. The two most significant events for the development of Scottish Romanticism -- the 1707 Act of Union and the 1745 Jacobite uprising -- are breaks with a past that must then be reincorporated into Scottish cultural history in ways that are not always straightforward.

The practice of history enacted these uneven temporalities. Antiquarianism was enthusiastically embraced by Scots in the later eighteenth century, as it was in Wales, but Scottish antiquarianism had a specific political context. Lord Kames's *Essays on Antiquities* (1747), published just after the Jacobite rising, explicitly announced itself as a remedy for the 'Calamities of a Civil War' in the form of 'a Spirit among his Countrymen, of searching into their Antiquities', commencing with a study of the introduction of Feudal Law into Scotland.[14] But if antiquarianism started off as an exemplary study of the ancient past for the present while making a claim for a clearly delineated modernity, it rapidly moved away from Kames's exposition of the development of constitutional law, and became associated with much less progressive

---

[13] Walter Scott (ed.), *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Longman and Rees, 1803), i, p. cxvi.

[14] Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Essays Upon Several Subjects Concerning British Antiquities* (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid, 1747), unpaginated.

forms of history. Antiquarians, both in their recovery of ancient texts and in their notoriously obsessive collections of objects, clung to the past in both metaphorical and literal ways. Antiquarian objects, experienced in direct or tangible ways very different from the detached speculation of stadial history, were a way of preserving the past not in linear sequence, but in random order with each object occupying the present in the same way. Defying the logical, causal order of Enlightenment history, the texts or objects of antiquarianism persisted in fragmented but immediate and corporeal forms.[15]

For Scottish Romantic literature, the uneasy accommodation of the past within the present is a consistent theme. Ina Ferris introduces the idea of the 'remnant', a figure (or sometimes an object) who circulates through Scottish literature. The remnant is both an obsolete figure from the past, and one who clearly lives and functions in the present (the beggar Edie Ochiltree in Scott's *The Antiquary* [1816] is a good example). The effect is to render the present ghostly and unsubstantial and to 'block the abstracting moves through which bridging narratives and categories recuperate and consolidate what has been left behind'.[16] Alternatively, the energies from the savage or Romance past, so far from being superseded, prove to be a model of the seemingly more sophisticated present: the outlaw Rob Roy in Scott's novel of that title, ostensibly a 'primitive' Highlander, is strikingly good at negotiating the modern world of political

---

[15] See Susan Manning, 'Antiquarianism, Balladry, and the Rehabilitation of Romance', in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[16] Ina Ferris, '"On the Borders of Oblivion": Scott's Historical Novel and the Modern Time of the Remnant', *Modern Language Quarterly* 70.4 (2009), 473-94 (pp. 478-9).

intrigue and commercial expansion in which he finds himself. As Ian Duncan says of Rob: 'who better than a freebooter should thrive in the new economy?'[17] Or, using Scott again as an example, the supposedly *last* minstrel, in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) is also a model of the modern poet, reanimating history in the form of Romance. Scott dedicates his poem to the contemporary family of the Duke of Buccleuch just as his ancient minstrel sings the narrative to an earlier incarnation of the same family.[18] And the poem generated a modern fashion for the ancient in the form of literary tourism: the section describing ruined Melrose Abbey by moonlight was repeatedly extracted for guide books, to satisfy the curiosity of visitors who flocked there. [19]

Scottish Romanticism, then, is animated, or sometimes reanimated, by dislocations and ruptures that are commemorated or preserved in literature and these ruptures in turn give the idea of national history an ironic self-awareness in Scottish writing. Britain -- at war with France for much of the period -- was enthusiastically in search of heroic national leaders. In England, a favourite literary character was King Alfred the Great, who featured in (among many other works) a twenty-four book epic poem by Joseph Cottle, the Bristol publisher of *Lyrical Ballads*. To an extent, Scottish authors participated in the search for heroes who could be co-opted as British. The

---

[17] Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 113.

[18] See Maureen McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 129-32.

[19] See Nicola J. Watson, *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 93-8.

popularity of William Wallace as a poetic hero demonstrates what Nancy Goslee calls 'the appropriation of [Scottish] legendary events into the eclectic myths of a larger British nationhood'. [20] But along side this are myths of doomed heroism. There was a small-scale revival in interest in Calgacus, supposedly the leader of the last of the Caledonian tribes to have fought the Roman occupying forces in open battle (Captain Hector M'Intyre in Scott's *The Antiquary* is composing an epic poem on the subject) but the Caledonians were not the victors in that encounter and the dominant strain of mythic heroism that characterised Scottish writing was the haunted absences of the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* or the defeat of the Jacobite army in *Waverley*. English heroes and their promotion of 'liberty' were not solely the preserve of English authors, and Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) explores the relations of the English Saxons to the invading French Normans, resolved by the triumphant return of Richard the Lionheart. But Scott's command of the novel, to the extent of the reinvention of the genre, is founded on an ironic awareness of how history is remembered in the present as well as how it presents itself to memory. He is careful to point out that this Richard may not be exactly the same as his popular legend:

> his reign was like the course of a brilliant and rapid meteor, which shoots along the face of heaven, shedding around an unnecessary and portentous light, which is instantly swallowed up by universal darkness; his feats of chivalry furnishing themes for bards and minstrels, but affording none of those solid benefits to his

[20] Nancy Moore Goslee, 'Contesting Liberty: The Figure of William Wallace in Poems by Hemans, Hogg, and Baillie', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 50 (2001), 35-63 (p. 35).

> country on which history loves to pause, and hold up as an example to posterity.[21]

In *Waverley,* Romance is often a matter of stage-management. The Jacobite Flora McIvor, hoping to enlist Edward Waverley in her cause, stages an elaborate spectacle of Celtic Romanticism, enlisting her Gaelic-speaking maid to pose with a harp against the dramatic background of a waterfall. The popularity of *Waverley* led to some very stagy displays of Scottishness, and the hero of Sarah Green's *Scotch Novel Reading* (1824) can only persuade the Walter Scott-obsessed heroine to fall for him by dressing up (unconvincingly) as a battle-scarred Scottish solider named Macgregor. But the point is not that Romance is *either* a relic of a long-dead, superstitious past *or* a cynical modern act of public relations, but rather that no such distinction can be sustained. Romance, rather, questions how the past might survive in, or reanimate, or model a present that, according to progressive versions of history, should have left it behind.

The Romance mode is not exclusive to the novel and we can see this form of temporality in the renewed interest in the late eighteenth century in the ballad, a revival that challenges not only the historical, but also the spatial divisions of the nation. Despite the popularity of national histories, Romanticism also witnesses a turn to the local and regional. This regionalism was in part a response to the growing fashion for picturesque travel and was driven by guide books' needs to differentiate between different localities, but it was also fed by a turn to localism in poetry and history that did

---

[21] Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. Graham Tulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 365.

not strictly respect national boundaries. The cultural geography of Britain had already identified a certain 'north country' that had no definite physical limits but signified the north of England and the south of Scotland. Travellers from England to Scotland frequently experienced the change in vocal accent as a gradual one and 'The Borders' constituted an area that was both Scottish and English. Wordsworth said that he had no difficulty in reading Burns's poems in Scots because of his familiarity with the English spoken in Cumberland and Westmorland. This 'north country' was predominantly a place of music and ballads. The English ballad-collector Thomas Percy commented in 1765: 'There is hardly an ancient Ballad or Romance, wherein a Minstrel or Harper appears, but he is characterized by way of eminence to have been "OF THE NORTH COUNTREYE".'[22] The Scottish antiquarian John Pinkerton concurred in *Ancient Scotish Poetry* (1786) that 'the old English bards being all of the *north countrie,* and their metrical romances being almost Scotish, because the language spoken in the North of England and the South of Scotland was anciently almost the same; as it is at this day'.[23]

The 'north country' functions as a place where the primitive energies and stories of the past have been preserved in a vital form. These stories frequently narrate violent events and their characters act upon equally violent impulse. The borderers from either side of the official national division have loosened their ties to the centralized monarchies of England and Scotland and live as clans or as outlaws, engaging in theft,

---

[22] Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols (London: J. Dodsley, 1765), i, p. xxi.

[23] John Pinkerton, *Ancient Scotish Poetry*, 2 vols (London: Charles Dilly, 1786), i, p. xvii.

murder, and revenge. The supernatural narrative of ballads and quatrain verse form were to inspire Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' and Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', but it was Wordsworth who identified in his early verse drama *The Borderers* how the cross-border rivalries of local families generated trans-national passions. Here, however, there is a difference as well as a similarity between Wordsworth's borderers and the figures in the ballads as they were collected and edited by Scott in the early nineteenth century. Wordsworth's localities, especially in *Lyrical Ballads,* are reflections of internal states as much as historical events. Although they are often marked by objects that give access to the past -- the sheepfold in 'Michael' or the staff in 'The Brothers' -- these are not antiquarian objects open to academic scrutiny. Rather, they speak of social bonds in the present or very recent past that depend on emotional and unique ties between individuals, as much as the tribal identities of past cultures.

Ballad collections, as their editors would have it, emerge just in time to transfer the preservation of these energies into forms of cultural capital. For Scott, the conservation of ballads could not be entirely entrusted to the people among whom they circulated, as these transmitters were prone to forget the words, or recite them unclearly owing to their propensity for drunkenness. Ballads now needed editors -- middle-class and educated -- to keep them alive. There had been collections of songs and ballads since the seventeenth century, but in the later eighteenth century, the ballad collection moves from being a social object to a more specifically cultural one. From its position as an object for social consumption, it begins to bear the role of commentary on the history of society. As ballads move into the domain of the antiquarian they start to perform the additional function of articulating a national history that finds its characteristic forms in local traditions. As he finishes the introduction to the *Minstrelsy*

Scott hopes that he may 'contribute somewhat to the history of [his] native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally'.[24] In a move characteristic of Scottish writing in the period, it is the death of history that calls history into being.

The *Minstrelsy*, as a literary artefact that translates Scottish history into modern culture, is itself part of a broader history of cultural capital. After the end of the Scottish Parliament in 1707 the idea of 'Scotland' is deflected away from political forms and onto cultural ones. Coterminous with the loss of national independence is the growth of a literary tradition that transfers Scottishness from a political to a literary plane. That this development has its origins with Allan Ramsay, poet, literary entrepreneur, impresario, and founder, in Edinburgh's High Street, of the first circulating bookshop in Britain, is significant. The titles of Ramsay's two collections of Scottish song, balladry, and poetry, *The Tea-Table Miscellany* and *The Ever-Green*, which both first appeared in 1724, tell us much about their cultural status. First, unlike the cheap broadside ballads that circulated through different social classes, these collections were designed for the middle-class tea table, and secondly the idea that older Scottish poetry remains 'ever-green' inaugurates a self-conscious tradition of literature that preserves the cultural objects of the past as a part of modernity. Literature was simultaneously ancient and modern. In the case of the ballads, there was an unbroken continuity between reproduced or edited ballads and those composed by modern poets in what Susan

[24] *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, i, p. cxxxii.

Stewart has called a 'distressed genre', modern works 'antiqued' by their authors.[25] After the initial success of the *Minstrelsy* Scott added further volumes including imitation ballads to those he had collected and edited.

In a social context, this gave Scottish culture a sense of the commercial value of its literary past. Allan Ramsay sold his Edinburgh-published collections in London and the anthologizing of popular Scottish poetry was a success for Burns, in partnership with James Johnson, in *The Scots Musical Museum* as well as for Scott in the *Minstrelsy*. The 'north country' was not just an imaginary space for the circulation of ballads, but also had an important concentration of regional publishing. Many ballad collections, including those by Joseph Ritson, were published in Durham and Newcastle. The first edition of Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was published in Kilmarnock, and the initial two-volume edition of Scott's *Minstrelsy* in the Borders market town of Kelso. At the same time, Edinburgh was rapidly becoming a major centre for publishing and reviewing. The phenomenal success of Scott's poetry and his *Waverley* novels, the rival quarterly journals the *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review*, and the upstart monthly *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* all worked to give Edinburgh the status of a literary capital that could both produce widely-read literature and direct literary taste. In the opinion of Lord Cockburn, one of the many lawyers who participated in this republic of letters, Edinburgh 'had the glory of

---

[25] Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Literary Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), esp. chs. 3 and 4. See also David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128-32.

being at once the seat of the most popular poetry, and the most powerful criticism of the age'.[26] Writing, publishing, and reviewing were not clearly differentiated roles; Scott, a partner in Ballantynes, the firm that printed his novels, did all three.

For many Scottish writers, the sense of being part of a commercial world of cultural capital is itself the subject of literature. James Hogg had worked as a shepherd and tenant farmer in the Scottish Borders before coming to Edinburgh, where he entered, with equal parts of enthusiasm and scepticism, into its literary hotbed. *The Queen's Wake* (1813), Hogg's most successful work during his lifetime, gives a poetic form to modern literary Edinburgh and its relation to a Scottish past. The poem describes a song contest between a number of bards who have congregated in the capital to celebrate the return to Scotland of Mary, Queen of Scots. Hogg is both the narrator of the poem and, in a 'distressed' antique version of himself, appears as one of the competing poets as he mediates between himself as a modern author in literary Edinburgh and the ancient fictional bards of the past. The royal court, like the institutions of literary taste-formation in modern-day Edinburgh, is riven with rivalries that threaten to obscure the authentic voice of natural poetry in the form of the simple shepherd-poet. It seems as if the over-sophistication, class-divisions, and consequent corruption of the modern poetic world cannot recognize its own past in the current of Scottish song:

---

[26] Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1856), 212. For Edinburgh as a contested 'Republic of Letters', see Duncan, *Scott's Shadow*, esp. ch. 1. On the connection between the city's legal and literary culture, see William's Christie's essay in this volume.

But when the bard himself appeared,
The ladies smiled, the courtiers sneered;
For such a simple air and mien
Before a court had never been.
A clown he was, bred in the wild,
And late from native moors exiled,
In hopes his mellow mountain strain
High favour from the great would gain. [27]

Hogg articulates a doubleness in Scottish culture. He identifies a heterogeneous, sophisticated literary scene that can produce bards to compose in a variety of modes and styles, together with a simple strain of Scottish song that gives access to a natural feeling that has been lost to English writers who can only produce 'an useless pile of art, | Unfit to sway or melt the heart' (Introduction, lines 201-2). But the poem is simultaneously aware that Scotland's 'simple native melody' (line 204) is also *produced* by the highly sophisticated, competitive literary market-place in which Hogg, who advertised himself as 'The Ettrick Shepherd', himself was a participant.[28] The contest

[27] *The Queen's Wake: A Legendary Poem*, ed. Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), Night the Second, lines 243-50.

[28] See Jason N. Goldsmith, 'Hogging the Limelight: *The Queen's Wake* and the Rise of Celebrity Authorship', *Studies in Hogg and his World* 16 (2005), 52-60; and Erik

ends with a confirmation of Scottish literary tradition from the entrepreneurial Allan Ramsay to the international celebrity poet Walter Scott, and with the idea that a Scottish canon has been formed.

Hogg's great novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) draws together a number of the ideas raised in this chapter. A story of determinism, alienation, and persecution, *Confessions* has much in common with William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). But where Godwin's novel is about *Things as They Are* (its original title),[29] *Confessions* entangles its keenly ironic account of early-nineteenth century Edinburgh and its literary culture with the irruption into the moment of its own publication of a text from an earlier time. The structure follows a modern-day 'Editor' pursuing, through local records and oral tradition, the story of a fratricide -- the murder of George Colwan, apparently by his brother Robert Wringhim, who disappears at the end of the story and is presumed to have killed himself. During the course of his investigations, the Editor discovers the autobiographical account, from the early eighteenth century, of the supposed murderer in which it emerges that Robert's actions have been driven by either a form of insanity and hallucination or by the literal Devil. The latter, going by the name of Gil-Martin, convinces the intensely religious Robert that if, according to the tenets of Calvinism, he cannot be damned, then it is his duty to rid the world of sinners by murdering them.

Simpson, *Literary Minstrelsy, 1770-1830: Minstrels and Improvisers in British, Irish, and American Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 117-25.

[29] *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams. By William Godwin,* 3 vols (London: B. Crosby, 1794).

The novel gives a disturbing Gothic voice to the literary self-consciousness of Romantic-period Scotland. The Editor starts the novel confident in the 'powerful monitors'[30] of historical record and local tradition -- the mainstays of Scottish antiquarian practices -- as if these were self-evident pathways to historical truth. But Hogg baffles us, not so much by withholding information as by giving us too much and in too many forms. The novel is full of instances of books, reading, printing, antiquarian research, and the publishing culture of literary Edinburgh. Robert not only writes his account, he goes to some lengths to have it printed. In the present day, the Editor reads (and reproduces) a letter from one James Hogg to *Blackwood's Magazine* describing the discovery of the body of a young man believed to have hanged himself. Attentive readers of 1824 would recall that this letter had indeed appeared in the historical *Blackwood's* as well as in the fictional novel. The Editor then sets out to find the body himself, and when it is re-exhumed he describes the clothing in great detail, remarking on its historical provenance as if the body were an antiquarian object. With the decayed corpse is Robert's own account -- a text from the past literally exhumed and preserved in the modern text of the Editor's narrative. Yet none of this communicates the mystery that the novel proposes: who killed George Colwan and why? The Editor is left admitting: 'With regard to the work itself, I dare not venture a judgment, for I do not understand it. I believe no person, man or woman, will ever peruse it with the same

[30] James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner,* ed. Peter D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 3.

attention that I have done, and yet I confess that I do not comprehend the writer's drift.'[31]

If *Confessions* marks the failure of antiquarianism it also -- in a peculiarly Scottish way -- renders the tradition of Romantic autobiography strange and uncommunicative. Hogg's title recalls Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) and other 'confessions' narratives, and two years before the publication of the *Private Memoirs and Confessions* the *Edinburgh Magazine* drew attention in an article on autobiography to 'the insatiable appetite of the public for every species of Private Memoirs and Correspondence'.[32] Alone, persecuted, alienated, and possibly insane, Robert seems to bear all the qualifications for a Romantic anti-hero of his own autobiography, but for all the details that he supplies of the events of his life and his changing mental states, he remains distanced from and unknowable to the reader. This is in part because of the novel's terrible sense that nothing can be known because everything is already known, though that knowledge is not transparent. The Calvinist belief in a predestined elect who will be saved -- in fact are *already* saved -- is represented in the novel as an already-written book -- the 'book of life' in which the names of the elect have been eternally inscribed. Hogg's intensely textually-aware novel exposes the psychological load of a text that is not susceptible to interpretation but which cannot be understood without some form of reading. Susan Manning sums this up: 'The burden of proof of election falls on the self-investigating conscious, but its

---

[31] Hogg, *Confessions*, 174.

[32] 'On Auto-biography', *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* (June 1822), 742.

findings might be radically untrustworthy.'[33] As his autobiography progresses, Robert's self-consciousness becomes increasingly fractured, divided between faith and doubt and finally unable to trust language itself as he recognises the Gil-Martin's double meanings: 'I objected to the words as equivocal, and susceptible of being rendered in a meaning perfectly dreadful'. At the end (we assume) Robert kills himself, leaving his own book to be unearthed, read, but not understood in the literary cultures of the 1820s, a strange, inexplicable object that is both essential for the Editor's modern project yet not assimilable by it.

[33] Susan Manning, *The Puritan-Provincial Vision: Scottish and American Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.

FURTHER READING

Davis, Leith, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation 1707-1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Davis, Leith, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen (eds), *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Duff, David, and Catherine Jones (eds), *Scotland, Ireland, and the Romantic Aesthetic* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007).

Duncan, Ian, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Duncan, Ian, and Douglas S. Mack (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to James Hogg* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012).

Fielding, Penny, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Lamont, Claire, and Michael Rossington (eds), *Romanticism's Debatable Lands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Leask, Nigel, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Lumsden, Alison, *Walter Scott and the Limits of Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010).

McLane, Maureen, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Trumpener, Katie, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).